

WATERING A TRANSBORDER BOOMTOWN: TIJUANDIEGO DURING PROHIBITION, 1920-1934

*Irrigando una ciudad transborderiza en auge:
Tijuandiego durante la prohibición, 1920-1934*

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Abstract: This article explores the transnational history of water development in Tijuandiego during the prohibition era. The U.S. liquor ban sparked a lucrative transborder “vice boom,” turning tiny Tijuana into a world-renowned tourist destination almost overnight. On both sides of the boundary, water was the key to the local economy—the essential element for profit. In Tijuana, U.S. capitalists collaborated with Mexican officials to develop the limited local water resources for their mutual benefit: first, to sustain the tourist boom ignited by prohibition; second, to increase agricultural production in the Tijuana River valley; and third, to integrate the distant northern territory more deeply into the Mexican nation. Politicians and businessmen in Baja California had to strike a delicate balance between the opposing orbits of Mexico City and southern California, and water management became a central feature of that balancing act.

Key words: Tijuana, water, prohibition, tourism, Presa Rodríguez, transnational history

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Resumen: Este artículo explora la historia transnacional del desarrollo del agua en Tijuandiego durante la era de la prohibición. La prohibición estadounidense provocó un lucrativo “vicio boom” transfronterizo, convirtiendo a la pequeña Tijuana en un destino turístico de renombre mundial. En ambos lados de la frontera, el agua era la clave de la economía local—el elemento esencial para obtener ganancias. En Tijuana, los capitalistas estadounidenses colaboraron con funcionarios mexicanos para desarrollar los limitados recursos hídricos para su beneficio mutuo: primero, para sostener el boom turístico desencadenado por la prohibición; segundo, para aumentar la producción agrícola en el valle del Río Tijuana; y tercero, para integrar más profundamente el lejano territorio nortero a la nación mexicana. Los políticos y empresarios de Baja California tuvieron que lograr un equilibrio delicado entre las órbitas opuestas de la Ciudad de México y el sur de California, y el manejo del agua fue un elemento central en ese acto de equilibrio.

Palabras claves: Tijuana, agua, prohibición, turismo, Presa Rodríguez, historia transnacional

INTRODUCTION

Tijuandiego—the transnational metropolis that emerged precisely at the intersection of Alta and Baja California over the course of the twentieth century—entered the 1920s on an upswing.² The Mexican Revolution and the Great War, as they

² I use the term “Tijuandiego” to convey the shared and inseparable histories of Tijuana and San Diego. My aim is not to negate the unique experiences of either city, but to emphasize that their local, regional, and national histories can only be understood in the context of one another. For more on the concept of the “transnational metropolis,” see Tito ALEGRÍA, *Metrópolis Transfronteriza: Revisión de la hipótesis y evidencias de Tijuana, México y San Diego, Estados Unidos*, (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2009); Lawrence A. HERZOG, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico*





are respectively mythologized, had finally come to an end, and transborder relations were beginning to reestablish and reinvigorate. Then came the momentous decision by the United States Congress in January of 1920 to prohibit the production and sale of “intoxicating liquors” throughout the United States, igniting the underground alcohol industry and setting off a “vice boom” that transcended international boundaries. Prohibition helped to transform Tijuana from a small settlement in the most distant corner of Mexico into a world-renowned tourist destination almost overnight. Alcohol and gambling were certainly the main attractions, but the tiny town had more to offer its visitors than just “vice.” For many Americans, a trip to Tijuana was a unique cultural experience—an opportunity to step beyond the boundaries of the United States and to explore “Old Mexico” firsthand, if only for a few hours.

Because of its location directly across the border from San Diego, Tijuana was in the perfect position to capitalize on the prohibitory laws passed in the United States. In many ways, the town emerged as an international appendage to San Diego—a place where southern Californians who chafed at the dry laws could legally quench their thirst. U.S. capitalists seized the opportunity to expand their business ventures across the border, and Mexican officials were more than willing to work with them, for a hefty share of the profits. The lucrative transnational tourist boom of the 1920s—set off by prohibition in the United States and boosted by enterprising Mexican businessmen and politicians—laid the groundwork in Tijuandiego for a transborder economy that has only expanded and diversified in the century since.

Border, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); and Hillar Yllo SCHWERTNER, “Tijuandiego: Water, Capitalism, and Urbanization in the Californias, 1848-1982,” PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2020, among others.





On both sides of the border, water was—and remains—the fuel of the local economy. Perhaps it goes without saying, but water is the essential element for all profit-producing endeavors, whether in Tijuandiego or anywhere else. And, because local water resources in Tijuandiego have been historically scarce, the competition for access has been especially fraught. In San Diego County, private water interests took the lead early on, building dams, reservoirs, and distribution networks throughout the backcountry to serve agriculture, industry, and domestic consumers for a profit. The municipal government of San Diego was late to the game. By the time the City sought to develop a water supply of its own, it could only purchase already-built storage and conveyance systems from private companies and wealthy individuals, who expected—and received—political power for their patronage. Once the City began to take firmer control of its own water resources in the 1920s, plans for development were determined, by and large, by the voting citizens of San Diego. Water issues—like where to dam a river, what kind of dam to build, and how much money to invest—were intensely debated in public forums and on the front pages of local newspapers. It was in many ways a democratic process, one in which local citizens were asked to familiarize themselves with the region’s water resources and the various competing plans for development, and to choose the path they considered best for San Diego’s future. Water projects, at least for the city proper, were publicly funded through bond issues, which the citizens of San Diego consistently voted to approve.

But democracy was a messy business, and the “will of the people” remained fickle. Corrupt business practices bled into local politics, and the associated payoffs, side deals, and silent partnerships often transcended national and cultural barriers. In San Diego’s backcountry, the region’s major capitalists continued to own and operate the water infrastructure used for





irrigated agriculture, particularly for the lucrative citrus and avocado operations stretching north and east from the city. Some of these capitalists—namely, John D. Spreckels of San Diego, as well as a few outside investors from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Montana, who were brought into the San Diego water business by local land developer Ed Fletcher—attempted to use their money and influence to sway public opinion on local water strategy, some with more success than others.

As the city grew larger, and as the U.S. Navy expanded its operations in San Diego after World War I, the competition for local water resources became ever more complicated. No longer was it simply a matter of competing private interests. Now, it included municipal, state, and federal interests, too—each with its own set of priorities and expectations. The government's encroachment into San Diego's waterscape challenged the existing order and threatened some of the investments that local capitalists had made on the region's rivers. Constant controversies over water rights created an atmosphere of legal uncertainty, which hindered plans for dam construction and frustrated the local population. Waterborne political capitalism in 1920s San Diego was an untidy affair, marked by shifting public-private relations and a looming sense of legal and financial risk.³ The convoluted situation persisted until 1929, when the California Supreme Court granted the City of San Diego full rights to the

³ Economist Randall G. Holcombe describes political capitalism as “an economic and political system in which the economic and political elite cooperate for their mutual benefit. The economic elite influence the government's economic policies to use regulation, government spending, and the design of the tax system to maintain their elite status in the economy. The political elite who implement those policies are then supported by the economic elite, which helps the political elite maintain their status...” I use the phrase “waterborne political capitalism” to denote the centrality of water in shaping the political capitalism that emerged in the arid California borderlands. See Randall G. HOLCOMBE, *Political Capitalism: How Economic and Political Power is Made and Maintained*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.





waters of the San Diego River, and thereby empowered the municipal government at the expense of private interests.⁴

San Diego's emergence as a U.S. naval and agricultural hub had ramifications across the border. In the Northern District of Baja California, a parallel, but distinct form of waterborne political capitalism took shape in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. Successive territorial governors—almost all military generals appointed by the president in Mexico City—had variable degrees of discretion when it came to implementing federal policies dictated from the distant capital, determined primarily by the personal relationships and business interests of the individual governors and presidents, as well as by a handful of powerful capitalists in southern California. These U.S. capitalists bankrolled the gaming and entertainment industries in Tijuana and Mexicali, which meant they played an outsized role in funding the territorial government of Baja California. Decisions regarding water development were made with this in mind, primarily serving to benefit those U.S. investors in conjunction with their Mexican business partners and political allies. Local *tijuanaenses* were not asked for their input, and no votes were held to determine the best course of action.

The parallel yet intertwined water histories of San Diego and Tijuana converge at intersecting scales—the story is simultaneously local, regional, national, and continental in scope. *This is why* a transnational approach to Tijuandiego does more than just tell “both sides” of the story—it helps to demonstrate that neither side can be understood in the absence of the other. The present article focuses on the development of Tijuana's water resources during the prohibition boom of 1920-1934; it thus constitutes a small but essential part of the larger

⁴ For more on San Diego's turbulent water history in the 1920s, see SCHWERTNER, “Tijuandiego”, 141-209. The present article focuses specifically on the development of Tijuana's water resources during the prohibition boom of 1920-1934.





transnational story. It aims to show how the development of water infrastructure in Tijuana was a transnational process, mediated by public and private interests, which responded to three fundamental purposes: first, to sustain the tourist boom ignited by prohibition in the United States; second, to increase agricultural production in the Tijuana River valley to generate income for state coffers; and third, to integrate the distant northern territory more deeply into the Mexican nation.

These three goals were not only related, but sequential. Water for the tourist boom came first, as local demand skyrocketed and opportunities for profit abounded. Tijuana's early water infrastructure was built in a hurried and piecemeal fashion, primarily intended to cultivate the capital of a few powerful U.S. and Mexican stakeholders. And while tax revenues from the booming tourist industries of the 1920s helped to fill the local treasury, the increasing influence and ownership of U.S. capitalists threatened the independence and integrity of the border region. Policymakers in Mexico City sought to stem the tide by establishing greater control over Baja California's water resources and expanding agricultural production for both public and personal profits. The development of irrigated agriculture across Mexico was a principal aim of the "postrevolutionary" government, especially under President Plutarco Elías Calles, who established the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación (CNI) in 1926 to ensure that water development in Mexican states and territories was executed under federal auspices. In Baja California, these federal efforts were focused on the Tijuana and Colorado Rivers, whose binational watersheds complicated the political and ecological dimensions of the region's waterscape.⁵

⁵ The Colorado River would eventually become the primary water source for Tijuandiego, but in the 1920s it remained a distant stream serving the agricultural interests of the Imperial-Mexicali Valley. On the early agricultural development of this region, see Eugene Keith CHAMBERLIN, "Mexican Colonization versus American Interests in Lower California," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1951): 43-55; Pablo Leocadio MARTÍNEZ, *Historia de Baja*





Politicians and businessmen in Baja California had to strike a delicate balance between the opposing orbits of Mexico City and southern California, and water management became a central feature of that balancing act. By establishing ownership of the Tijuana River—or at least the portion of its waters flowing through Mexican territory—the Mexican state sought to build a bulwark in the face of its prying neighbors to the north. Controlling the finite water resources along the international boundary was the essential first step in “colonizing” Baja California in the name of Revolutionary Mexico.

But what was so revolutionary, besides the rhetoric? The prior decade of upheaval in Mexico had hardly shaken Baja California—if anything, the entrenched U.S. interests gained an even deeper foothold on the peninsula. The 1920s saw an influx of U.S. capital below the border, welcomed and aided by “revolutionary” governors and presidents in Mexico. On both sides of the boundary, U.S. capitalists operated through the existing political systems: formal yet pliable democracy in San Diego; postrevolutionary oligarchy in Baja California. In both cases, would-be state-makers worked hand-in-hand with regional powerbrokers to their mutual economic and political benefit. Profits generated by the so-called “vice industries”—whether in alcohol, gambling, prostitution, or narcotics trafficking—were collected by both U.S. and Mexican capitalists, who used the prohibitory laws and the political geography of the border region to their mutual advantage. In Tijuandiego, the lines between private, public, U.S., and Mexican interests were often blurry—and intentionally so.

California (Mexico City: Libros Mexicanos, 1956); Edna Aidé GRIJALVA, “La Colorado River Land Company,” in ed. PIÑERA RAMÍREZ, 1983, 350-61; Adalberto WALTHER MEADE, *El valle de Mexicali*, (Mexicali: UABC, 1996); José Alfredo GÓMEZ ESTRADA, *La gente del delta del Río Colorado: Indígenas, colonizadores y ejidatarios*, (Mexicali: UABC, 2000); Dorothy Pierson KERIG, *El valle de Mexicali y la Colorado River Land Company, 1902-1946*, (Mexicali: UABC, 2001); and Pablo HERRERA CARRILLO, *Reconquista y colonización del valle de Mexicali*, (Mexicali: UABC, 2002), among others.





The key players recognized that water was the basis for regional power, and they acted accordingly.

THE PROHIBITION BOOM

At the stroke of midnight on January 17, 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution—often referred to as the Volstead Act—legally prohibited the production, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages across the United States. Literally overnight, bootlegging became the primary industry in the nation’s sprawling underworld. Petty criminals joined with well-connected crime bosses to form powerful whiskey- and rum-running syndicates, which supplied huge quantities of illicit booze to the tens of thousands of “speakeasies” springing up across the country. Drinking might have been deemed illegal by moral reformers in Washington, D.C., but it remained quite easy for those less “morally inclined” Americans to continue to get their fill—especially when police and other local authorities were often willing to turn a blind eye in exchange for some cash or liquor themselves. As historian Paul Vanderwood put it: “Plain and simple, Prohibition corrupted officialdom.”⁶ Still, boozing now came with a legal risk and a social stigma that caused many Americans to reconsider old habits. For those living near the boundary with Mexico, however, where drinking remained perfectly legal—and in some places, strongly encouraged—a trip over the line became all the more enticing.

Visitors from southern California came pouring into Tijuana in the wake of the liquor ban, and the “border barons” made sure that they were ready to capitalize. In just a few short months, prohibition turned tiny Tijuana (population: 1,000)

⁶ Paul J. VANDERWOOD, *Satan’s Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America’s Greatest Gaming Resort*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 104-105.





into a powerful magnet for anyone interested in the consumption or trafficking of alcohol. This was a very unfortunate development in the eyes of moral crusaders in the United States. Investigators sent by the Temperance Board of the Methodist Church in September of 1920 reported that “everything goes at Tia Juana...The town is a mecca of prostitutes, booze sellers, gamblers and other American vermin.”⁷ Liquor smuggling flourished across the border, as the big-time bootleggers paid off local officials on both sides *in order to* carry out their illicit activities with impunity. In August of 1921, the Consul in Mexicali wrote to the Secretary of Foreign Relations in Mexico City to inform him of the “frauds” being constantly committed at the customs station in Tijuana. He requested that a government inspector be sent to the border town immediately, “in order to put an end to the irregularities that day by day grow more scandalous in nature.”⁸

A report from the official notary of the U.S. Navy in San Diego, F. W. Becker, painted an even bleaker picture of the rampant corruption and overall *malgovernance* on display in Tijuana. Becker considered Baja California to be the “weak point” of the Mexican nation, “where loyalty is scarce.” Tijuana, like Mexicali, was being sustained almost entirely by its gaming commissions and liquor sales, which were managed by “a mixture of American interests who have enjoyed all kinds of privileges in the past.” Becker laid out the intricate details of

⁷ “Methodist Temperance Board Would Bar Travel to Tia Juana: Shocked Conditions,” *New York Times*, Sep. 14, 1920.

⁸ Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFI), Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles (APEC), Gaveta 18, Exp. 233, legajo 1, inv. 1249, *Consul in Mexicali to Secretary of Foreign Relations, Sep. 10, 1921*. [“...Me permití dar a esa superioridad una información amplia y detallada de los fraudes que se venían cometiendo en la Aduana fronteriza de Tijuana, B.C., en la introducción clandestina de licores y en mi mensaje de fecha 22 del mismo mes, solicité de esta Secretaría de su merecido cargo el rápido envío de un visitador a dicho lugar a fin de que pusiera fin a las irregularidades que día a día tomaban un carácter escandaloso...”]





the transborder “vice trade,” alleging the existence of a “committee of seduction and bribery” led by Carl Withington, whom he deemed “the president and principal suborner.”⁹ Becker was incensed at the blatant disrespect that Withington and his criminal associates showed for the rule of law on both sides of the border. “If this league is not broken up,” he warned, “the degree of loyalty of those living in Baja California will not increase.”¹⁰

Of course, the social movement for moral reform was not a singularly U.S. phenomenon—in Mexico City, President Álvaro Obregón proclaimed his own moralization program in the early 1920s, aimed at rooting out gambling, drinking, and other “indecent” activities that threatened to damage Mexico’s national character. Obregón’s moralization efforts were met with mixed results across the country, however, with substantial pushback coming from Baja California, where tourism had already come to dominate the local economy. Between 1920 and 1923, Obregón appointed and subsequently removed three successive governors in Baja California for their failure to enforce his federal mandates.¹¹ The last of these three governors, José Inocente Lugo, came to office in February of 1922 on the promise that he would “clean up” the territory by implementing a

⁹ Withington was a well-known Bakersfield bordello owner, whose business ventures in Baja California included El Tecolote nightclub in Mexicali and the Monte Carlo casino in Tijuana, among others.

¹⁰ FAPECFE, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 4/12, inv. 3316, *F. W. Becker to José Inocente Lugo, May 1, 1922*. [“...Este es el punto débil de la nación, donde la lealtad escasea... Tijuana, lo mismo que Mexicali, se sostiene y se han sostenido, en su mayor parte, por medio de las concesiones de Juego y la venta de licores, manejados por una mezcla de intereses americanos, que han gozado de toda clase de privilegios en el pasado... El que suscribe, acusa formalmente, la existencia de un Comité y fondo de seducción y soborno... El Comité está formado por... Carl Withington, presidente y principal sobornador... Puedo, francamente, predecir que si esta liga no se rompe, el grado de lealtad de los habitantes del Distrito norte de la Baja California, no aumentará...”]

¹¹ See Marco Antonio SAMANIEGO LÓPEZ, *Los gobiernos civiles en Baja California, 1920-1923: Un estudio sobre la relación entre los poderes local y federal*, (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1998).





40-mile-wide “prohibition zone” stretching across the California border. Governor Lugo’s proposal was well-received—not only by moralist politicians in Mexico City, but also by many more progressive residents in California. Alice Collis, a teacher and a mother from Brentwood, wrote to Governor Lugo on his first day in office to express her appreciation for his efforts to rid Tijuana of its ubiquitous vices: “Good people all over the world are praying for you,” she assured him, taking great solace in the fact that “someone in your high position is a pious and God-fearing man.”¹² Another woman, a doctor from Los Angeles named Eleanor Seymour, wrote to Lugo the following day: “As a citizen of your neighbor to the north, please accept my gratitude for everything you have done and are doing to establish moral, clean, and safe conditions on the border between our beloved countries.”¹³

Governor Lugo might have had honest intentions when he initially took the job, but after a few months on the ground in Baja California, he had all but abandoned his plan to shut down the liquor and gaming establishments that drove the booming border economy. Instead, like those who came before him, he used his role as local powerbroker to grant gaming concessions to some—and deny them to others—in exchange for hefty cash remunerations. In the spring of 1922, Lugo struck a deal with Carl Withington to renew his gambling license for the Monte

¹² FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 2/12, inv. 3316, *Alice Collis to José Inocente Lugo, Feb. 11, 1922*. [Likely translated from original English: “Aplaudimos los esfuerzos y determinación de Ud. para ‘limpiar’ el Distrito de usted de un vicio tal como el que prevalece en Tijuana... La gente buena en todo el mundo está rogando por Ud. y lo bendice por su firmeza. Es ciertamente agradable que alguien en la alta posición de Ud. sea un hombre piadoso y temeroso de Dios.”]

¹³ FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 2/12, inv. 3316, *Eleanor Seymour to José Inocente Lugo, Feb. 12, 1922*. [Likely translated from original English: “Como ciudadano de su vecino cercano al norte, acepte Ud. mi estimación por todo lo que Ud. ha hecho y está haciendo en establecer condiciones morales, limpias y salvas en la frontera entre nuestros amados países.”]





Carlo, under the condition that a full 25 percent of the casino's revenues would go directly into the coffers of the territorial government.¹⁴ This was raw political capitalism, whereby the chief federal representative in Baja California used revenues generated by the U.S.-operated gaming industry to both personally profit and to pay for essential public services. In his correspondence with his superiors back in Mexico City, Governor Lugo insisted that he was making steady progress on his mission to *clean up* the border region. However, the governor was soon accused by local residents, businessmen, and political organizations of blatantly protecting the most notorious gamblers and smugglers in Tijuana and Mexicali. Governor Lugo tried to defend himself to President Obregón by claiming that his accusers did not actually care about public morality, but rather were upset that they had not been granted the concessions themselves.¹⁵ This, of course, did not satisfy Obregón, who had given Lugo explicit instructions to shut down all gambling establishments in the territory in accordance with federal law.¹⁶ Lugo was deeply dismayed by the president's reaction to these "baseless allegations," and he ultimately decided it was best to "quietly retire to private life so as not to be a cause of displeasure to my superiors."¹⁷

The volatile political situation in Baja California finally ended in 1923, when General Abelardo L. Rodríguez took over

¹⁴ Vincent Zachary CABEZA DE BACA, "Moral Renovation of the Californias: Tijuana's Political and Economic Role in American-Mexican Relations, 1920-1935," PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1991, 89.

¹⁵ FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 11/12, inv. 3316, *José Inocente Lugo to Álvaro Obregón, Feb. 13, 1923*.

¹⁶ FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 11/12, inv. 3316, *Álvaro Obregón to José Inocente Lugo, Mar. 2, 1923*.

¹⁷ FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 49, Exp. 127, legajo 11/12, inv. 3316, *José Inocente Lugo to Plutarco Elías Calles, Mar. 12, 1923*. ["Me retiraré tranquilo a la vida privada para no ser motivo de disgustos a mis Jefes... Tendré el consuelo de que el señor General Obregón reconozca que en este incidente he habido mala fe de parte de los que lo han impresionado con falsas imputaciones."]





the governorship with full support of President Obregón and his soon-to-be successor, Plutarco Elías Calles.¹⁸ Rodríguez had fought bravely alongside Obregón and Calles during the bloodiest years of the revolution, and in 1920 he had been sent to Baja California to serve as the region's chief of military operations. After three years of unsatisfactory civilian government, Obregón decided it was time to impose stricter order in Baja California and handed the reigns of political power to General Rodríguez.

As a trusted member of the Sonoran clique that came out on top in the revolution, Rodríguez was given substantial leeway from central authorities to govern his remote territory as he saw fit. Much like those who came before him, Rodríguez viewed tourism (and especially the “vice trade”) as the primary means by which to expand the local economy and to strengthen the financial autonomy of Baja California. Unlike his predecessors, however, he now had the full support of his superiors to take advantage of the unique opportunities afforded in this region. Rodríguez steadfastly defended the public's right to drink and gamble on Avenida Revolución, as well as at the Monte Carlo casino and racetrack. “Tijuana lives from tourism,” he explained, and “without it, the town would not exist.”¹⁹

Governor Rodríguez intended to continue using the tax revenues brought in from the tourist industries to build new schools, roadways, and water infrastructure for the growing town of Tijuana. And, as might have been expected, he also planned to utilize his position as the region's dominant power-broker to become the greatest border baron of them all. In addition to overseeing the liquor and gaming industries in Baja

¹⁸ Calles was a fellow Sonoran general who had served as Interior Secretary under President Obregón.

¹⁹ FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 66, Exp. 189, legajo 5/11, inv. 5010, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Edmundo Moneda, Secretaría de CROM, Oct. 14, 1925*, quoted in VANDERWOOD, *Satan's Playground*, 121.





California, Rodríguez also worked to expand his own personal investment portfolio, which over time would include eclectic interests in real estate, construction, hotels, golf courses, cinema productions, oil, aircraft manufacturing, telecommunications, mining, carbonated soft drinks, vineyards, shrimp and shellfish packing, and several banks, just to name a few.²⁰ As historian Paul Vanderwood described him, Rodríguez “certainly was not the only triumphant military general to turn good fortune into fabulous wealth, but he was *sans parallèle* at investing, saving, laundering, and spending the mammoth profits extracted from his privileged position.”²¹ This was revolutionary capitalism, indeed.

RÍO TIJUANA

By the mid-1920s, the tiny town of Tijuana was one of the major tourist destinations on the West Coast. With a settled population of only a few thousand people, it drew thousands of additional daily visitors from southern California and beyond who wanted to experience the “spirit” of Old Mexico—or at least to taste the spirits on offer in the countless cantinas on Avenida Revolución. Still, Tijuana had more to offer its guests than just bars and casinos, and the town became a popular place for friends and families to gather and to celebrate with one another. Many residents of southern California organized lunches and parties in Tijuana’s restaurants and hotels, whether for wedding receptions, anniversary dinners, or other celebratory banquets hosted by civil organizations. The rise of “motoring clubs” in California also brought a steady

²⁰ See José Alfredo GÓMEZ ESTRADA, *Gobierno y casinos: El origen de la riqueza de Abelardo L. Rodríguez*, (Mexicali: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2002).

²¹ VANDERWOOD, *Satan’s Playground*, 120-122.





stream of automobile traffic across the border, as Tijuana was the obligatory crossing point for those who wished to venture deeper into Mexican soil to hunt, to visit Ensenada, or to follow the route of the old Spanish missions. Opportunities to drink and to gamble drove most of the tourist traffic, but Tijuana was also a destination for “upright” people who wished to enjoy the scenic beauty and vibrant culture that Mexico had to offer.

With so many people crossing the border daily, Tijuana’s limited supply of potable water began to reach its limits. In the early 1920s, the town’s water came from a series of wells dug into the nearby Tijuana riverbed and delivered to Avenida Revolución through a rudimentary network of pipes. This system had worked for a while, but by 1926, the need to update and expand urban water infrastructure was evident. However, the question of how to do so—and who would pay for it—was not so obvious.

Mexico’s federal water policy was enshrined in Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917, which declared that “ownership of the lands and waters within the boundaries of the national territory is vested originally in the Nation, which has had, and has, the right to transfer title thereof to private persons, thereby constituting private property.”²² In one sense, this marked a decisive shift toward the nationalization of Mexico’s natural resources—they were officially declared the property of the nation, to be doled out to the Mexican people at the discretion of federal authorities. At the same time, Article 27 explicitly upheld the right of private ownership of natural resources, except in those cases where the state determined them of “public

²² 1917 *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, Art. 27. [“La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas dentro de los límites del territorio nacional corresponde originariamente a la Nación, la cual ha tenido y tiene el derecho de transmitir el dominio de ellas a los particulares constituyendo la propiedad privada.”]





utility.”²³ The nation reserved the right, at all times, to “impose on private property the modalities dictated by the public interest, as well as to regulate, for social benefit, the use of natural elements capable of appropriation, with the objective of an equitable distribution of public wealth...”²⁴ In other words, the federal government could expropriate private property and redistribute wealth and resources in the name of social and economic justice.

As “revolutionary” as Article 27 was in nature, in many ways it represented a *return* to traditional Hispanic water law—based on the principle that *access* to water is a fundamental social right.²⁵ The article affirmed the collective rights of the Mexican people to access and to utilize the nation’s natural resources for the benefit of the common good. Yet these land and water concessions were not intended as gifts to be granted by a benevolent federal government—they came at a price. On July 9, 1917, as a corollary to Article 27, Mexican President Venustiano Carranza decreed the establishment of a “federal income” on the use of all public waters. This meant that any private individual who sought to use surface or groundwater in Mexican territory had to negotiate a contract with the federal

²³ See Mikael D. WOLFE, *Watering the Revolution: An Environmental and Technological History of Agrarian Reform in Mexico*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 15-18. [“Las expropiaciones sólo podrán hacerse por causa de utilidad pública y mediante indemnización.”]

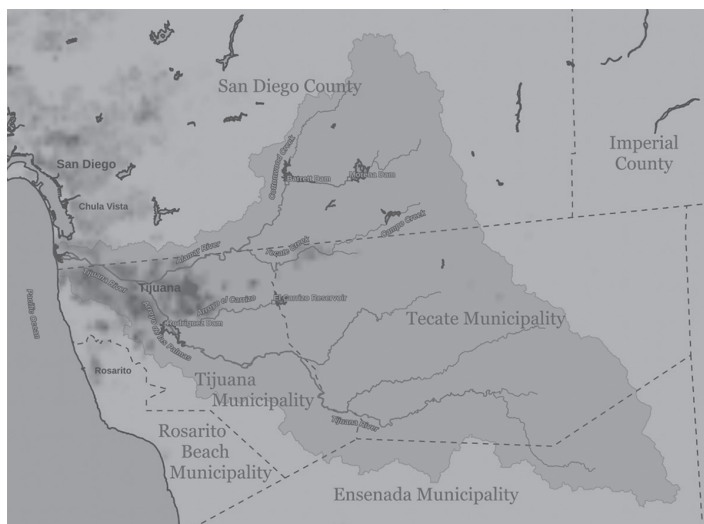
²⁴ *1917 Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, Art. 27. [“La nación tendrá en todo tiempo el derecho de imponer a la propiedad privada las modalidades que dicte el interés público, así como el de regular, en beneficio social, el aprovechamiento de los elementos naturales susceptibles de apropiación, con objeto de hacer una distribución equitativa de la riqueza pública, cuidar de su conservación, lograr el desarrollo equilibrado del país y el mejoramiento de las condiciones de vida de la población rural y urbana.”]

²⁵ On the legacy of Hispanic water law in the continental southwest, see Michael C. MEYER, *Water in the Hispanic Southwest: A Social and Legal History, 1550-1850*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996); and Norris HUNDLEY, JR., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water—A History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), among others.



government. In Baja California, local officials wondered what this meant for the binational watershed of the Río Tijuana—the only significant source of water in the arid northwestern corner of the Mexican nation.²⁶

FIGURE 1. THE TIJUANA RIVER BASIN. [GEOBICA, “MAP OF THE TIJUANA RIVER BASIN,” APR. 20, 2021.]



In the early 1920s, engineers from the Mexican Department of Agriculture and Development were dispatched to Tijuana to study the watershed and locate potential damsites. Their priority was to build a storage dam and reservoir on the Río de las Palmas, the main southern tributary of the Río Tijuana, in

²⁶ The Tijuana River’s two main tributaries—Cottonwood Creek in the United States and the Río de las Palmas in Mexico—converge at a point about five miles below the border to form a single stream—the Río Tijuana—which flows in a northwesterly direction through the center of town before crossing into the United States and emptying just south of San Diego Bay.

order to begin irrigating the surrounding valley. Stored water could also be used to supply the growing domestic and industrial needs of Tijuana. Beyond that, development of the watershed on the Mexican side of the border would help to strengthen Mexico's claim to the river in the face of U.S. intrusions. This was a unique situation—the Department of Agriculture oversaw countless water development projects throughout the country, but very few had such immediate international implications. In a memo written in September of 1922, the director of irrigation at the Department, Octavio Bustamante, implored that work should begin right away on the Tijuana River, “in order to use all of the water possible in Mexican territory before it passes to American soil.”²⁷ In this sense, the transborder hydropolitics playing out on the Tijuana River mirrored the situation on the Colorado River, where the United States claimed the legal right to use *all* of the river's water before it flowed into Mexico.²⁸

As planning got underway for construction of a large storage dam on the Río de las Palmas, the prohibition-inspired tourist boom in Tijuana was in full stride. Americans flocked by the thousands to the town's main casino and racetrack, as well as to a lively assortment of bars, restaurants, dance halls,

²⁷ Archivo Histórico del Agua (AHA), Aprovechamientos Superficiales (AS), Caja 644, Exp. 9319, *Octavio Bustamante to Oficial Mayor Encargado de la Subsecretaría, Sep. 23, 1922*. [“...para utilizar por nuestra parte en el territorio de México todo el volumen posible de las aguas del río de Tijuana antes de que pase a suelo americano.”]

²⁸ The situation on the Colorado River was further complicated by the fact that most of the productive agricultural land on the Mexican side of the border was owned and operated by U.S. capitalists through the Colorado River Land Company. On the transborder hydropolitics of the Colorado River, see Norris Hundley, Jr., *Dividing the Waters: A Century of Controversy Between the United States and Mexico*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); and Marco Antonio Samaniego López, *Ríos internacionales entre México y Estados Unidos: Los tratados de 1906 y 1944*, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2006), among others.

cabarets, bordellos, and opium dens—all sanctioned by Governor Abelardo L. Rodríguez, who regulated the “vice industries” in Baja California and profited impressively from them.²⁹ With so many thirsty visitors crossing the border each day, the town’s limited available water supply was quickly drying up. A future storage dam on the Río de las Palmas would eventually be used to supply the urban needs of Tijuana, but that was going to take years to build, and local officials wanted more water *now* to sustain the tourist boom.

In February of 1926, the president of Tijuana’s municipal council, Federico Palacio, proposed that additional water could be drawn from the so-called “Laguna de los Españoles”—a small, naturally occurring pool that formed near the convergence of Cottonwood Creek with the Río Tijuana just a few miles southeast of town. For years, this water had been utilized by two Mexican nationals of Spanish origin (hence the name, Laguna de los Españoles), who used it to irrigate large agricultural plots on the eastern margins of the river. Palacio contended that this water would serve a much more beneficial purpose if it were distributed to the people of Tijuana instead.³⁰ His request was officially granted by the Secretary of Agriculture in May of 1926, for the right to draw up to 3.5 million cubic meters of water per year from the Laguna de los Españoles, to be used for public services in the municipality of Tijuana.³¹

By the time the concession was granted, the town’s chief engineer, Luis G. Romero, had already completed his surveys and submitted his final plans. Water would be drawn from the

²⁹ VANDERWOOD, *Satan’s Playground*, 120.

³⁰ AHA, AS, Caja 722, Exp. 10507, *José L. Favela to Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, Feb. 13, 1926*.

³¹ Archivo Histórico del Estado de Baja California (AHEBC), Distrito Norte (DN), *Federico Palacio to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, Mar. 8, 1926*, [3.4]; AHEBC, DN, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Federico Palacio, Mar. 12, 1926*, [3.4]; AHA, AS, Caja 722, Exp. 10507, *Federico Palacio to Secretario de Agricultura y Fomento, Apr. 15, 1926*.



lagoon at a rate of 27 liters per second—sufficient capacity to support a population of 11,000 inhabitants with an individual allocation of more than 200 liters per day. Tijuana had less than half that many permanent residents at the time, but water experts also accounted for the thousands of American tourists who crossed the border almost daily. From the lagoon, water would flow by gravity through an 8.5-kilometer open canal to the foot of the hill south of Avenida Revolución, where it would get pumped uphill to an elevation of 30 meters and then emptied into a cement-lined storage tank with a capacity of 5,000 cubic meters. Finally, from the storage tank at the top of the hill, water would be delivered by gravity to the bustling town below.³² This project was not intended to solve Tijuana's long-term water problems—it was meant to temporarily relieve the mounting urban water pressures set off by the transborder prohibition boom.

Romero had come up with the project's design, but to oversee its construction, Tijuana's municipal council chose to hire a San Diego hydraulic engineer named Earl S. Casey, who was instructed to work in tandem with Romero on the project. They both signed a contract on May 28, 1926, and work got started on the water intake at the Laguna de los Españoles just a few days later. The project appeared to go smoothly at first, but major disagreements between Casey and Romero over technical aspects of the work led to a dramatic falling-out between the two engineers. On October 7, Casey expressed his frustrations with Romero in a long letter to Governor

³² AHEBC, DN, *Luis G. Romero to Federico Palacio, May 15, 1926*, [3.4]; AHEBC, DN, *Federico Palacio to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, May 27, 1926*, [3.4]; AHA, AS, Caja 751, Exp. 10883, Hoyo López, Ingeniero de la Agencia General en el Distrito Norte de la Baja California, "*Informe sobre aprovechamiento de aguas del río de Tijuana por la población de Zaragoza, B. Cfa.*," May 1, 1929; Abelardo L. RODRÍGUEZ, *Memoria administrativa del Distrito Norte de la Baja California, 1924-1927*, (Mexicali, no editorial, 1928), 230-33.





Rodríguez: “I denounce engineer Romero as a person who is not competent as an engineer and who is not capable of directing a project of this nature.” Casey then went on to list, in detail, 24 specific examples of Romero’s costly incompetence during construction.³³ Upon learning of these accusations against him, Romero launched into his own attack against Casey, claiming that the American had abandoned the project part-way through and was not fulfilling his end of the agreement—even though he had already been paid in full. Romero dismissed Casey’s list of grievances as “the rantings of a man filled with disappointment and spite for not having been able to execute such a simple project, and for having squandered away all the money due to his careless administration.”³⁴ He went on for seven pages, tearing into Casey for his ignorance, his poor work ethic, his wastefulness, and his bad faith. Construction halted as the situation deteriorated.

Casey’s apparent negligence in Tijuana had caught up with him on the other side of the border, as well. In November of 1926, a San Diego banker named P. V. Morgan reached out to Governor Rodríguez to inquire about a Mr. Earl S. Casey, to whom his firm had advanced funds for a construction project in Mexico that were now well past due. “We have received very courteous consideration from the officials of Tia Juana, who advised us that Mr. Casey has received all the money due him in connection with the contract itself,” the banker explained, “but Mr. Casey tells us that there is considerable of a balance due him on account of extra work ordered by the Engineer at

³³ AHEBC, DN, *Earl S. Casey to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, Oct. 7, 1926*, [3.4]. [“Yo denuncié al ingeniero Romero como una persona que no es competente como ingeniero y no es capaz de dirigir un proyecto de este carácter.”]

³⁴ AHEBC, DN, *Luis G. Romero to Flavio J. Bórquez, Presidente del Consejo Municipal, Oct. 28, 1926*, [3.4]. [“...Solamente veo en él, la absoluta ignorancia o mala fe en el asunto y una serie de desahogos propios de la desilusión y el despecho por no haber podido ejecutar una obra tan sencilla y el haber despilfarrado el dinero, por su pésima y mala administración.”]





Tia Juana in connection with the contract, and not actually covered by the contract.” Morgan wanted to know whether or not Casey had any additional funds coming his way. “We regret to advise that our dealings with Mr. Casey have been very unsatisfactory,” he noted, and “inasmuch as we have been forced to doubt several things Mr. Casey has told us we will appreciate very much the courtesy of your attention and a reply.”³⁵ Rodríguez wrote back a week later, declaring that “Casey is owed absolutely nothing—and not only that, but this same contractor, due to a lack of skill or negligence, did not execute the works entrusted to him, which has done notable damage to the Municipality of Tijuana since it will have to spend many thousands of dollars to fix the work that should have been done correctly by contractor Casey.”³⁶ Clearly, Casey had managed to irritate a number of people on both sides of the border. But even if the town of Tijuana was put to a considerable extra expense to complete the project without him, Casey had put in an original bid so much lower than the next lowest bidder that the final cost was hardly even considered excessive.³⁷

The pipeline, pumping plant, storage tank, and distribution network were completed and operational by the end of 1926, an achievement celebrated by the municipal council in Tijuana and applauded by Rodríguez from his governor’s palace in Mexicali. As part of the new urban water system in Tijuana, a dozen fire hydrants were installed throughout the town in

³⁵ AHEBC, DN, *P. V. Morgan to Abelardo L. Rodríguez*, Nov. 26, 1926, [3.4].

³⁶ AHEBC, DN, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to P. V. Morgan*, Dec. 3, 1926, [3.4].
[“...Al contratista Casey no se le adeuda absolutamente nada y no solamente eso, sino que dicho contratista por impericia o negligencia no ejecutó debidamente los trabajos que se le encomendaron, con lo que resulta notablemente perjudicada la Municipalidad de Tijuana, porque tendrá que erogar muchos miles de dólares en enmendar los trabajos que debió haber ejecutado correctamente el contratista Casey.”]

³⁷ AHEBC, DN, *Emil Klicka, President of Klicka Lumber Company, to Abelardo L. Rodríguez*, Jan. 6, 1926, [3.4].





order to facilitate the work of the local fire brigades, which had previously struggled to prevent blazes from spreading when they broke out on Avenida Revolución or in the residential neighborhoods to the south.³⁸

Unfortunately, heavy rains in February of 1927 caused the Tijuana River to overflow its banks, washing out the water intake at Laguna de los Españoles and filling in the lagoon with sediment. This was not the first time that powerful floodwaters had damaged Tijuana's fledgling urban infrastructure, and it would not be the last.³⁹ In this case, at least, the destruction was relatively minor. A new intake valve and siphon were installed a few hundred meters downriver and reconnected to the main channel, which had survived the flood without much damage.

Once repairs were completed, the water system could deliver about 2,000 cubic meters per day to urban Tijuana—water which was used not only for domestic and commercial consumption, but also to water gardens, clean streets, and provide other public services. According to one engineer's assessment of the new water infrastructure, however, a significant amount of waste could be noted, particularly regarding "the poor connection of the spigots in the homes, where there is a constant runoff, and in the watering of orchards and crops, where it is customary to use flood irrigation and spend much more water than is necessary."⁴⁰ The system had its inefficiencies, no

³⁸ RODRÍGUEZ, *Memoria administrativa*, 233.

³⁹ Tijuana suffered from several major flood events over the years, which periodically destroyed homes, roads, bridges, pipelines, and other urban infrastructure. The persistent flood threat was ultimately addressed by the channelization of the Tijuana River in the 1970s. See Antonio PADILLA CORONA, "Desarrollo Urbano," in ed. PIÑERA RAMÍREZ and ORTIZ FIGUEROA, 1989, vol. 1, 183-201.

⁴⁰ AHA, AS, Caja 751, Exp. 10883, *Hoyo López, Ingeniero de la Agencia General en el Distrito Norte de la Baja California, "Informe sobre aprovechamiento de aguas del río de Tijuana por la población de Zaragoza, B. Cfa.," May 1, 1929.* ["Como desperdicios pueden anotarse: el mal ajuste de las llaves en las casas donde hay un constante escurrimiento y luego el riego de huertas y sembrados





doubt, but it ultimately provided enough water to serve the growing population of Tijuana and to sustain the tourist boom for at least a few more years. That was good enough, for now.

PRESA RODRÍGUEZ

Ever since Abelardo L. Rodríguez took over as governor of Baja California in 1923, he advocated for the rapid development of all water resources in the territory as a means to increase the region's commercial viability and agricultural production—and thus, its economic security and political independence. Rodríguez envisioned a dam on the Tijuana River as the essential next step in securing Baja California's economic and political future. It would allow the territorial government to control the natural river by “artificial means,” expanding the production of crops through irrigation and providing a “safe, constant, and sufficient” supply of “cheap, potable water” for the growing urban population of Tijuana.⁴¹ By making more water available in this most distant and vulnerable corner of the republic, Rodríguez sought to “colonize” the territory with Mexican nationals and to fortify the peninsula from its prying neighbors to the north. This was an important piece of the emerging postrevolutionary development strategy of expanding irrigated agriculture across Mexico.

donde se acostumbra hacer el riego por inundación gastando mucho más agua de la necesaria.”]

⁴¹ RODRÍGUEZ, *Memoria administrativa*, 177. [“...Los siguientes benéficos resultados: a) El control de los factores naturales por medios meramente artificiales, que garantice la producción de cosechas bajo sistemas de riego; b) Tijuana tendrá un medio seguro, constante y suficiente de vida para su población actual y cualquier aumento que se promueva con la evolución económica que se registre, y c) El abastecimiento de agua potable barata para los usos domésticos de la población.”]





The chief hydraulic engineer in Baja California, Guillermo González, was tasked by the Department of Agriculture and Development to conduct further studies on the Río Tijuana. In August of 1926, González organized a commission of four local engineers and assigned them to investigate the two most promising damsites in the watershed—Cañón García on the Río de las Palmas, and Cañón Marrón at the confluence of the Río Tecate and Cottonwood Creek.⁴² He sent the commission to the Río Tecate to start, since the Marrón damsite was located directly on the international boundary and González was aware of U.S. interest in building a large storage dam precisely at that location.⁴³ It was thus imperative that the territorial government of Baja California had all the topographical and hydrological information it could possibly attain, especially if it were going to engage with the United States on questions of international water rights.⁴⁴ The more that Mexican officials knew about the Río Tecate, the better they could defend their rights to its waters.

As the engineering commission carried out its survey of the Río Tecate in the spring of 1927, a U.S. businessman from San Francisco named Murray Innes reached out to one of his associates in Tijuana, Mariano Escobedo, to pitch him on the idea of constructing a massive storage dam on the Río de las Palmas—not at Cañón García, but at a narrow gorge even further upstream known as Cañón de Tijuana.⁴⁵ A dam at this location,

⁴² AHA, Aguas Nacionales (AN), Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Guillermo González, Jefe de la Primera Zona de Aguas, to C. Ingeniero Jesús Franco Urías, Tecate, Aug. 25, 1926*, f. 192.

⁴³ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Guillermo González to C. Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, México, D.F., Aug. 25, 1926*, f. 192.

⁴⁴ AHA, AS, Caja 643, Exp. 9304, *Guillermo González, "Proyectos," Aug. 31, 1926*.

⁴⁵ Mariano Escobedo was a local businessman who owned and operated the Tijuana Bar and Café in downtown Tijuana. He would later go on to establish the short-lived Coronado Islands Yacht Club—a casino and hotel built on South Coronado Island, about 8 miles offshore—as well as the iconic Frontón Palacio Jai Alai on Avenida Revolución.





claimed Mr. Innes, could potentially form a reservoir with “ten to twenty times” the storage capacity of Lake Henshaw, at that time the largest storage reservoir in San Diego County.⁴⁶ The dam could also be built to produce hydroelectricity “for all of Tijuana’s needs,” with plenty left over to “stimulate manufacturing to a certain degree.”⁴⁷

Innes reassured Escobedo that this project was “purely the business of your own country”—that Mexico had every right to develop the Río de las Palmas to its fullest capacity, “just as we are doing with our rivers north of the line.” The only problem, explained Innes, was that this project was going to be expensive, likely more than “your City or District” could afford. But Innes thought he had a workable solution:

I am of the opinion that if your government granted you a concession for 99 years this dam could be built. Exact investigations can be made to determine the present and future needs, not only of your city, but of all the tributary lands south of the dividing line. After understanding more liberally all of these needs, the rest of the supply can, in turn, be sold in San Diego County.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The Henshaw Dam was built at Warner Ranch on the San Luis Rey River in 1923, forming a reservoir with a storage capacity of 168,000 acre-feet. See Lloyd C. FOWLER, “A History of the Dams and Water Supply of Western San Diego County,” Master’s thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1952, 118-19.

⁴⁷ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Murray Innes to Sr. Mariano Escobedo, Mar. 9, 1927*, f. 192. [Likely translated from original English: “El depósito propuesto en las Palmas puede prontamente tener una capacidad de 10 o 20 veces esta cantidad dependiente de la altura de la presa construida... La elevación de la presa es tal que la suministración al depósito local de Tijuana pudiera generar suficiente fuerza para todas las necesidades de Tijuana, para alumbrado y fuerza y probablemente un exceso que pudiera estimular la manufactura en cierto grado...”]

⁴⁸ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Murray Innes to Sr. Mariano Escobedo, Mar. 9, 1927*. [“Es de gran importancia notar que este proyecto es puramente un negocio de su propio país... el hecho de que el río de Tijuana sea considerado en conexión con el río Colorado y el río Grande no impide a México, en el más ligero grado, desarrollar y usar sus propias aguas de la mejor





Thus, this San Francisco oil magnate was proposing a scheme in which Tijuana would develop a much larger water supply than it currently required in order to sell the “excess” water to the United States. Here was another American industrialist aiming to develop Mexican water resources for the “mutual” benefit of both nations. Perhaps Innes had benevolent intentions behind his proposal, but postrevolutionary officials in Mexico were increasingly wary about U.S. capitalists seeking to exploit Mexican resources for their own profit.

A translated copy of Innes’s letter to Escobedo soon found its way into the hands of the chief hydraulic engineer of Baja California, Guillermo González. González immediately forwarded the letter to his superiors at the Department of Agriculture and Development in Mexico City to inform them of the machinations afoot in Tijuana. According to González, the most important question that needed to be answered was whether it was “appropriate to grant a concession to a private enterprise” to build a dam on the Río de las Palmas, or if “the Government should take charge of the respective works,” given the international significance of the Tijuana River watershed.⁴⁹

The granting of a concession to a private enterprise had its obvious advantages—chief among them that the government

manera, justamente como lo estamos haciendo con nuestros ríos del Norte de la línea... Además se admite que su Ciudad o Distrito, por ahora, no pueden suministrar una gran inversión de 2.500.000.00 dólares o quizá ni aún una fracción de esta suma... Soy de la opinión de que si su Gobierno concediera a usted una concesión por 99 años esta presa pudiera ser construida. Investigaciones exactas pueden ser hechas para determinar las necesidades presentes y futuras y no solamente de su Ciudad sino de todas las tierras tributarias al Sur de la línea divisoria y después de entender más liberalmente a todas estas necesidades, el resto de la suministración a su vez puede ser vendido en el Condado de San Diego.”]

⁴⁹ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Guillermo González to Gu-marro García de la Cadena, Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, Mar. 24, 1927, f. 192.* [“Hay un punto de especial importancia que debe ser estudiado, y es, si conviene que se otorgue una concesión a una empresa privada, o el Gobierno es quién debe tomar a su cargo los trabajos respectivas, dada la importancia que tiene el río Tijuana por ser internacional...”]





would not have to make any immediate expenditures—but González warned that the transnational components of this proposal would “make it easy for the shares to pass to foreign elements,” creating “a situation similar to those prevailing elsewhere along this frontier,” like with the Colorado River Land Company in the Mexicali Valley. The best path forward, suggested González, would be for the federal government to grant a concession to the territorial government of Baja California for the rights to the waters of the Río Tijuana, instead. That way, the project would remain firmly in Mexican hands, without the federal budget being charged directly for the cost of construction. As long as Mexico City was willing to provide “effective and determined aid,” Baja California would be more than happy to “protect the national interests in the Northern District” by building a dam on the Río de las Palmas.⁵⁰

González’s proposal might have actually been accepted had he made it a few years prior, but by 1927, President Plutarco Elías Calles had already created the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación (CNI) to oversee the development of all federal water resources throughout Mexico. Because the Tijuana River was considered a “federal river” by law, it thereby fell under the exclusive jurisdiction of the newly formed CNI. In April of 1927, shortly after González had written to Mexico City, the Secretary of Agriculture, Luis L. León, formally declared that all future engineering studies and plans for development on the Río Tijuana were thenceforth to be carried out under the explicit

⁵⁰ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Guillermo González to Guamaro García de la Cadena, Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, Mar. 24, 1927*. [“La concesión a una empresa privada, tendría la ventaja de que el Gobierno, no tendrá que hacer erogaciones de dinero; pero como esta obra queda inmediata a la línea divisoria, sería fácil que las acciones pasaran a elementos extranjeros, y se produjeran situaciones análogas a las que predominan en esta frontera... Desde otro punto de vista, aún cuando por la magnitud de la obra, no sea de aquellas que merezcan la atención decidida del Gobierno nacional, si es conveniente que le preste una ayuda eficaz y decidida, con objeto de proteger debidamente los intereses nacionales en Distrito Norte.”]





guidance of the CNI. Secretary León also instructed González to put all the existing documentation and data collected on the watershed into a single archive to be shared immediately with the CNI's designated representatives.⁵¹ A few days later, the CNI dispatched one of its trusted hydraulic engineers from Mexico City, José L. Favela, to take over the government's engineering operations in Baja California. The message was abundantly clear: water development in any part of Mexico was now the official business of the federal government.

In addition to appointing Favela, the CNI also contracted the services of a U.S. engineering firm, J.G. White Engineering Corporation of New York, to assist with Favela's work on the Tijuana River.⁵² The American engineer they sent to consult with Favela, Charles P. Williams, arrived in Tijuana in May of 1927 and got straight to work. To get a better sense of the region's transnational water situation, Favela and Williams arranged a multi-day tour of San Diego's rivers, dams, and distribution systems—especially those on Cottonwood Creek, the “north fork” of the Tijuana River.⁵³ Once they returned to Tijuana, they focused their attention on Cañón García, on the “south fork,” directing a team of engineers to conduct core drillings in the bedrock and to measure the potential storage capacity of a reservoir at this location. After a few more months of investigations, the engineers sent by the CNI were ready to recommend the construction of a large storage dam at Cañón García, which they believed would help to achieve “economic stability” in the border region by developing local agriculture, increasing the population of Mexican nationals, protecting

⁵¹ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, “Acuerdo del C. Secretario 01733,” *Luis L. León, Secretario de Agricultura y Fomento, to Gumaro García de la Cadena, Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, Apr. 18, 1927*, f. 192.

⁵² J. G. White Engineering Corporation served as expert consultants in a number of other CNI projects in Mexico at the time, including those in the Laguna region, as discussed in WOLFE, *Watering the Revolution*.

⁵³ “Mexican Engineer Studies Water Here,” *San Diego Union*, Jun. 7, 1927.





against floods during the rainy season, and supplying a safe source of drinking water for up to 60,000 people.⁵⁴

At the time, Tijuana had a population of only about 10,000.⁵⁵ But the plan to “colonize” Baja California with tens of thousands more hard-working, loyal Mexicans from the nation’s interior was going to require much more water than was currently available. Thus, Governor Rodríguez enthusiastically endorsed the recommendations of Favela and Williams, writing to President Calles to reiterate the urgency of this project given its “international aspects.”⁵⁶ Rodríguez became the chief promoter of the dam—and eventually its namesake—immersing himself deeply in the details of the engineering plans and agricultural studies of the lands and soils of the surrounding valley.

A dam at Cañón García was particularly attractive for two main reasons: it was located less than 200 meters from the San Diego & Arizona Railway line, which would make transportation of construction materials (and, later, agricultural products) much more streamlined; and it could impound over 100,000 acre-feet of water, which would make it one of the largest storage reservoirs on the West Coast. The impounded water would be used primarily for irrigation in the river valley—not only to expand the acreage dedicated to grains and vegetables for local consumption, but also to begin producing

⁵⁴ Antonio PADILLA CORONA, “La presa Abelardo L. Rodríguez, modelo de ingeniería hidráulico,” in eds. PIÑERA RAMÍREZ and ORTIZ FIGUEROA, 1989, vol. 2, 93-110; Benedicto RUIZ VARGAS, ed., *Agua en Tijuana: Retos y Avances*, (Tijuana: Comisión Estatal de Servicios Públicos de Tijuana, 1994), 14.

⁵⁵ Padilla Corona estimates 8,000; Engineer Guillermo González estimated 14,000 in April of 1928. See PADILLA CORONA, “La presa Abelardo L. Rodríguez”, 93; AHA, AS, Caja 651, Exp. 9430, *Guillermo González, Jefe de la Primera Zona de Aguas, Tierra y Colonización, “Memorandum,” Apr. 21, 1928.*

⁵⁶ FAPECF, APEC, Gaveta 66, Exp. 189, legajo 7/11, inv. 5010, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Plutarco Elías Calles, Oct. 18, 1927.* [“Por el aspecto internacional que tiene este proyecto y que se presenta en el sentido de la distribución de aguas que pudieran llamarse internacionales, es muy importante que cuanto antes se lleven a cabo los trabajos de que se trata.”]





citrus crops for the growing international markets of Canada and Japan.⁵⁷ This was the essential next step in integrating Baja California into the Mexican nation—by integrating it into the global economy. The idea was to complement urban development with agricultural expansion, creating a more diversified economic base upon which to build into the future.

Once the location for the dam was selected, the question then became which type of dam to build. Geological surveys conducted at the damsite indicated an undesirable pattern of rock and subsoil in the streambed, which eliminated the possibility of a conventional gravity dam due to the high pressure it would force on the weak and shattered foundation. In fact, as would soon be discovered, the damsite was located directly on a fault line—which the experts noted had not “moved appreciably” in more than a hundred years, but which ultimately eliminated the possibility of building a multiple-arch dam at the site due to the lingering perception that this design was unsafe in the face of a potential earthquake.⁵⁸

Ultimately, the engineers decided that the best option for this particular location was an Ambursen-type dam—an innovative structure designed by the Ambursen Dam Company of New York. It consisted of a series of articulated concrete slabs, inclined at 45 degrees, and supported by buttresses which stood independent from one another. It required less concrete than a traditional gravity dam and was thought to be more reliable than a multiple-arch dam in a region known for its shifting tectonics.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Rodríguez notes that Japan, alone, imports more than 12 million dollars' worth of citrus from the state of California each year. See RODRÍGUEZ, *Memoria administrativa*, 191.

⁵⁸ AHA, Consultivo Técnico (CT), Caja 14, Exp. 68, *F. L. Ransome, Professor of Economic Geology, California Institute of Technology, "Report on the Rodríguez Dam-Site on the Tijuana River, Lower California," Oct. 1, 1928*, ff. 284; AHA, CT, Caja 14, Exp. 68, *"Rodríguez Dam in Mexico: Highest of Its Type," Engineering News-Record (New York), Oct. 16, 1930*, ff. 284.

⁵⁹ PADILLA CORONA, “La presa Abelardo R. Rodríguez”, 96-99.



In February of 1928, Governor Rodríguez signed a contract with the Ambursen Dam Company for construction of a 230-foot-high dam at Cañón García, estimated to cost a total of \$2,400,000 and to require 20 months to complete. The contract stipulated that payments would be made by the territorial government on a monthly basis (\$120,000 per month), and that 80 percent of those employed by the company would be Mexican nationals.⁶⁰ Because Rodríguez was such a trusted friend and confidant of President Calles, he was given free rein to negotiate the contract himself—directly with the Ambursen Dam Company—rather than to operate through the CNI. This meant the federal government would not have to spend any money on the project, and that all of the necessary funds would come directly from the local treasury of Baja California. In exchange for taking on the personal responsibility of financing the dam, Rodríguez asked that Calles allow for all construction materials and equipment to pass through the customhouse duty-free. Calles was happy to oblige—the easier it was for the dam to be built, the better.⁶¹

Work got underway on the Presa Rodríguez, as it was now being called, in April of 1928—at the height of the Roaring Twenties, when the stock markets were soaring and there was money to go around. The two lead engineers, Favela and

⁶⁰ Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC), Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas (IIH), Colección Baja California en el Archivo General de la Nación (BCAGN), Fondo Obregón-Calles (OC), *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Plutarco Elías Calles, Feb. 14, 1928*, [9.15]; AHA, AS, Caja 651, Exp. 9430, *José L. Favela, El Agente General en Zaragoza, B.C., to C. Dr. José G. Parres, Subsecretario de Agricultura y Fomento, Feb. 18, 1928*; UABC, IIH, BCAGN, Fondo Pablo Herrera Carrillo (PHC), *Santiago Reachi, “La Presa Rodríguez,” untitled newspaper, 1932*, [4.15].

⁶¹ UABC, IIH, BCAGN, OC, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez to Plutarco Elías Calles, Feb. 14, 1928*, [9.15]; FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 66, Exp. 189, legajo 7/11, inv. 5010, *Rodríguez to La Comisión Nacional de Irrigación, México, D.F, Mar. 28, 1928*; FAPECFT, APEC, Gaveta 66, Exp. 189, legajo 7/11, inv. 5010, *Rodríguez to Señorita Soledad González, Mar. 29, 1928*.



Williams, oversaw the construction of a work camp next to the damsite, as well as the installation of pumps and storage tanks to provide the workers with potable water and drainage services.⁶² By mid-summer, they had built houses and dormitories for the employees, as well as offices for administrators, a small police station, a medical center, and a company store. On a nearby *meseta*, informal shops and restaurants began popping up, while other lots were specifically designated for a grocery store, a barbershop, and a billiards hall, among other establishments. There would be no bar, however, since the consumption of alcohol at the damsite was “absolutely prohibited.” And, given that a fair number of workers had brought their families along with them, a schoolhouse was built to teach the children during the day and to provide classes for adults in the evenings.⁶³ By August, there were about 450 men working on the dam, with perhaps a few hundred more women and children living at the work camp nearby. Favela was proud of the progress being made, thanks in large part to the “skill on the part of the Mexican workers to perform the different jobs entrusted to them.”⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the U.S. stock market crash in October of 1929 sent economic shockwaves reverberating outward from

⁶² José L. Favela to Francisco L. Terminel, *Oficial Mayor, Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, México, D.F.*, quoted in AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, Francisco L. Terminel to C. Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, *Región Norte, May 25, 1928*, ff. 192.

⁶³ AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, José L. Favela to Francisco L. Terminel, quoted in Francisco L. Terminel to C. Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, *Región Norte, Jul. 9, 1928*, ff. 192.

⁶⁴ José L. Favela to Luis Arturo Romo, *Oficial Mayor, Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento, México, D.F.*, quoted in AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, Luis Arturo Romo to C. Director de Aguas, Tierras y Colonización, *Región Norte, Sep. 28, 1928*, ff. 192. [“Todos los trabajos están siendo llevados con gran atingencia y actividad, notándose bastante habilidad por parte de los obreros mexicanos para desempeñar los distintos trabajos que se les encomiendan...”]





New York City—with the power to transcend oceans, borders, and any other barriers that might have stood in the way. In Baja California, funds set aside for the Presa Rodríguez began to dry up fast, forcing construction to halt indefinitely in November of 1930. By this time, Abelardo Rodríguez had retired as governor and returned to Mexico City to serve in the administration of President Pascual Ortiz Rubio, who held his own office at the pleasure of the *jefe máximo*, Plutarco Elías Calles.

Over the course of the next year, a series of interim governors were appointed and subsequently removed from office in Baja California, until General Agustín Olachea secured the position in November of 1931. Governor Olachea managed to resume work on the dam in December, but with a substantially reduced budget. In May of the following year, Olachea wrote to President Ortiz Rubio about the challenges he faced in trying to complete the much-needed project in a timely manner, noting that engineers in charge of construction estimated it would cost an additional \$2,000,000 before all was said and done.⁶⁵

However, after spending a few months assessing the situation, Olachea had come up with a plan: he requested that the Department of Agriculture and Development grant a concession to his territorial government for all the water to be stored behind the Presa Rodríguez, as well as the lands to be irrigated in the river valley, in order to begin selling those land and water rights to private individuals to help pay for the dam's construction. The idea was to turn the Tijuana River valley into an organized land of private property, subdivided into agricultural plots and occupied by enterprising Mexican families. This way, the project could be completed in a matter of months, rather than the seven or eight years he estimated it would otherwise take to finish. And, most importantly, the completion of the Presa Rodríguez would finally give Tijuana the necessary means to “counteract the absorbing influence of

⁶⁵ UABC, IHH, BCAGN, Fondo Pascual Ortiz Rubio (POR), *Agustín Olachea to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, May 11, 1932*, [3.81].





the city of San Diego, of the United States of America.”⁶⁶ This was a matter of international significance, and it required immediate attention—even during the Great Depression.

President Ortiz Rubio was receptive to Governor Olachea’s proposal, recommending to the Secretary of Agriculture that the concession be granted straight away. Given the importance of establishing an irrigation system in Tijuana—“both from the point of view of international politics, as well as for the creation of a center of agricultural wealth in the Territory”—the government of Baja California was granted permission to sell land and water rights to private interests in order to pay for the dam.⁶⁷ Shortly after the concession was granted, however, Ortiz Rubio fell out of favor with the *jefe máximo* and was forced to resign the presidency in protest. To take his place, Calles appointed none other than his old pal and current Secretary of War, Abelardo L. Rodríguez. Once he assumed the presidency in September of 1932, Rodríguez found himself in a welcomed position to use the machinery of the federal government to continue advancing his own personal interests in Baja California—as well as those of his friends, political allies, and business partners on both sides of the border. This was a clear opportunity—an invitation, really—to incorporate the local po-

⁶⁶ UABC, IHH, BCAGN, FONDO PASCUAL ORTIZ RUBIO (POR), *AGUSTÍN Olachea to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, May 11, 1932*, [3.81]. [“Si como lo deseo logro conseguir el capital necesario para la terminación de la obra, en el plazo antes citado, se obtendrá además que la ciudad de Tijuana sea pronto un gran centro de población, para contrarrestar la influencia absorbente de la ciudad de San Diego de los Estados Unidos de América.”]

⁶⁷ UABC, IHH, BCAGN, POR, *Pascual Ortiz Rubio to Agustín Olachea, Jun. 9, 1932*, [3.81]; AHA, AN, Caja 1018, Exp. 13222, Legajo 1, *Pascual Ortiz Rubio, “Acuerdo a la Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento,” Acuerdo Presidencial Número 935, Jul. 1, 1932*, ff. 192. [“CONSIDERANDO: Que reviste una gran importancia la realización del sistema de riego denominado ‘Presa Rodríguez’ para captar las aguas del arroyo Las Palmas, en la Delegación de Tijuana, Territorio Norte de la Baja California, tanto desde un punto de vista político internacional, como por la creación de un centro de riqueza agrícola en dicho Territorio...”]





litical capitalism of Baja California into the national political capitalism of Mexico City.

Remember, Rodríguez had a stake in almost every money-making enterprise that took place in Baja California, and the completion of his namesake dam would be a boon to nearly all of them. Governor Olachea, recognizing the opportunity at hand with Rodríguez at the helm of the national government, wrote to the newly installed president in October to request federal funds directly from the source. Olachea asked Rodríguez if the CNI, now under his capable leadership, might be willing to provide the estimated three million pesos it would take to complete the work within a year—“which, as you know, will constitute the true beginning of effective development of this most interesting region.” According to Olachea, the value of water stored behind the finished dam would equal the total cost of the work itself, so it was actually “anti-economic” to continue investing such small amounts of capital into its construction.⁶⁸ Not only was the valuable river water continually wasting away into the sea, but even worse, it was being claimed by the United States before doing so. This situation needed to be remedied—and quickly—before too much Mexican water was lost to the United States for good.

Taking Olachea’s message as his cue, Rodríguez issued a presidential decree in January of 1933 which empowered the CNI to take over all aspects of the Presa Rodríguez. Because of the dam’s “marked national interest,” he explained, “it is not possible to leave its execution subject to events which could influence the resources of the Local Treasury.”⁶⁹ The Govern-

⁶⁸ FAPECF, APEC, Gaveta 56, Exp. 61, legajo 2/6, inv. 4094, *Agustín Olachea to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, quoted in Agustín Olachea to Plutarco Elías Calles, Oct. 10, 1932.* [“Si para el año entrante, usted ordena que la Comisión Nacional de Irrigación dedique para la Presa Rodríguez, tres millones de pesos, podemos de una vez terminar la obra, que como usted sabe, constituirá el verdadero principio del desarrollo efectivo de esta interesante región.”]

⁶⁹ FAPECF, APEC, Gaveta 56, Exp. 61, legajo 3/6, inv. 4094, *Abelardo L. Rodríguez, “Acuerdo a la Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento,” Jan. 20, 1933.*





ment of the Northern Territory of Baja California was to renounce all rights and concessions it had been granted to help pay for the dam's construction, as well as to terminate the contract it had originally signed with the Ambursen Dam Company at the behest of then-Governor Rodríguez in 1928. Now, President Rodríguez was going to renegotiate the arrangement with Ambursen through the CNI, which would obtain the necessary funds to complete the project from the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit.⁷⁰ A new contract was drawn up in February of 1933—a full five years after the original “20-month” agreement was signed—and from that point forward, the Presa Rodríguez would remain in the hands of the federal government. It had taken some serious maneuvering, but Rodríguez was finally going to get his dam.

CONCLUSION

In December of 1933, the United States Congress ratified the Twenty-first Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, repealing the Eighteenth Amendment and ending the federal prohibition of alcohol. The 14-year liquor ban had worn thin with the general public, and in the context of the Great Depression, it seemed “anti-economic” to allow such a profitable industry to remain outside the fiscal reach of the federal government. The transborder prohibition boom had officially come to an end, but the commercial and cultural connections it forged in Tijuandiego were only just beginning.

[“...A fin de que tales obras queden terminadas a la mayor brevedad posible por ser de tan marcado interés nacional, que no es posible dejar su ejecución sujeta a los eventos que puedan influir en los recursos del Erario Local.”]

⁷⁰ FAPECFE, APEC, Gaveta 56, Exp. 61, legajo 3/6, inv. 4094, *Francisco S. Elías, Presidente de la Comisión Nacional de Irrigación, “Acta No. 26,” Jan. 25, 1933.*





The border barons of the prohibition era—chief among them, Abelardo L. Rodríguez—created a transnational urban hub that drew thousands of daily visitors from all corners of the continent. In order to maintain and expand the public and personal profits generated by this tourist traffic, Rodríguez and his associates initiated and oversaw the development of the Tijuana River watershed on the Mexican side of the border. This began in 1926, with the project to siphon water from the Laguna de los Españoles and deliver it to the bars, restaurants, shops, and homes of urban Tijuana. It continued, on a much larger scale, with the Presa Rodríguez, built to fuel rapid urban and agricultural expansion in the years to come. The Presa Rodríguez began as a public works project for the Territory and finished as a public works project for the Nation, but the whole time it remained a deeply personal project for the General-turned-Governor-turned-President for whom it was named—and for whom it would most profit.

Prohibition ignited the tourist boom in Tijuana, but water ultimately sustained it. And water development—like tourism—was a thoroughly transnational affair. Funding for Mexican water projects came from taxes on the tourist industries, which were overwhelmingly operated by U.S. capitalists and sustained by American dollars. The engineers who designed and constructed the waterworks also came from both sides of the border, whether they were working on small-scale conveyance systems or building one of the largest and most cutting-edge storage dams on the continent. And, while the main impetus for the Presa Rodríguez was to jump-start commercial agriculture in the Tijuana River valley, its ultimate beneficiaries would be the transnational capitalists who invested in the city's urban core.⁷¹

⁷¹ For more on the Presa Rodríguez and its role in Tijuana's water history after 1934, see SCHWERTNER, "Tijuandiego", 210-401.





Prohibition opened people's eyes to the extraordinary economic opportunities available at the international boundary, if only one were willing to seize them. Accordingly, the repeal of prohibition did not end the transborder economic boom—it simply changed the rules of the game and offered new opportunities for profits. Subsequent generations of transborder capitalists—working both within and outside the blurry boundaries of the law—could thank the border barons of the prohibition era for laying the foundations of Tijuandiego in water and concrete.

